

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Private Veterinary College: An Unfamiliar Model or Déjà Vu All Over Again

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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With reasonable assurance for veterinary accreditation being granted this spring to Midwestern University in Arizona¹ and Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee,² and with Western University of the Health Sciences recently achieving reaccreditation,³ many in the profession are expressing concern at the expansion of veterinary colleges that has now reached 30 in the United States. Off shore, two other colleges—Ross University on St. Kitts and St. Georges University on Grenada— also received Council on Education accreditation in 2011 and are graduating several hundred students who return to the US for employment.

What is distinct about these five colleges is that they are private, receiving no direct state support for infrastructure or faculty salaries though their students have access to Title IV student loan support. The Caribbean schools generally prefer to be called “private,” though they could also be classified as “for profit,” unlike the three US-based private schools which are part of a more traditional university setting that is referred to as “not-for-profit.”

The veterinary college at Tufts University and the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania are also classified as private, though they each receive operating support from their respective states (commonwealths). The remaining 25 veterinary colleges are located on land-grant university campuses, with strong jurisdiction provided by their respective state governments. While also a land-grant institution, the governance of Cornell University is unique amongst veterinary colleges in that it has a private-public blend, with the College of Veterinary Medicine, which has state support, being administered by the private corporation that governs the university.

If you believe this to be a complicated aggregation of institutions granting veterinary degrees, it was even more complicated a century ago. By 1916, the tenth and last of the “legacy colleges” had been established at Texas A&M, and all but the University of Pennsylvania were at land-grant campuses, receiving financial support from their respective states.

However, the majority of veterinarians were being produced by a few robust, private colleges in the Midwest. The most prominent of these were:⁴

- Chicago Veterinary College (1883 – 1920), 2,610 graduates

- Kansas City Veterinary College (1891-1918), 1,789 graduates
- McKillip Veterinary College (1892-1920), 1,223 graduates
- St. Joseph's Veterinary College (1908-1924), 420 graduates

North of the border in Toronto, the Ontario Veterinary College educated large numbers of American men starting in the 1860s, continuing as a private college until the turn of the century when it became affiliated with the University of Toronto.

The curricula of these private colleges varied greatly. Kansas City Veterinary College moved from a two- to three-year curriculum in 1896 and is generally regarded as the premier academic institution of the group. At the other end of the spectrum, some programs offered as little as four months of instruction in each of two years. Curricula were largely clinically-oriented to diseases of the horse, and the instructors were often practicing veterinarians. The degree of Veterinary Surgeon (VS) was the standard for these colleges.⁵

The advent of the internal combustion engine and the increasing standardization of veterinary curricula within university settings forced the closure of these private colleges. The continued growth of veterinary medical education was accomplished in the university setting, mostly at land-grant institutions.

One hundred years later, private colleges have reemerged. Some say they crowd the market and produce an excess of veterinarians. Others express concern—some in words strident and disdainful—that their quality is not at par with that of the traditional college (mostly land-grant) with full teaching hospitals and research programs of varying capacity.

Whether it was then or now, history teaches us that the private sector fills the need where the public sector fails to go. A century ago, the impact of graduates of private colleges was enormous. In the end, isn't that the only reliable way to reflect on the ultimate value of our educational institutions?

¹ [Midwestern Closer to Accreditation](#). JAVMA News, July 1, 2013.

² [Lincoln Memorial gets green light from AVMA Council](#), AVMA News, August 15, 2013.

³ [Western University College of Veterinary Medicine, Accreditation](#). College web site, August 5, 2013.

⁴ The author credits Howard Erikson, DVM, PhD, Kansas State University, and Fred Born, DVM, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, for sharing information on early veterinary colleges.

⁵ *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

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TOPIC:

Veterinary Colleges in the United States

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.